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Gratitude and the Worship of God in Jesus Christ

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October 12, 2025—28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading: 2 Kings 5.14-17; 2 Tim 2.8-13; Luke 17.11-19

The readings for the Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C) are centered on the idea of gratitude. The Gospel is the familiar story of the ten lepers (Luke 17.11-19), only one of whom returns to give thanks to Jesus. Unique to Luke's Gospel, this is a familiar account to even the casual Bible reader, used in every childhood catechesis as an example of the importance of saying "Thank you." It is the gospel used at the Mass on Thanksgiving Day in the United States. The first reading introduces the theme of thanksgiving with the end of the story of the healing of Naaman the Syrian leper, who returns to Elisha to offer gifts after his healing (2 Kgs 5.14-17). The Alleluia verse ties this theme together with a verse from Paul, "In all circumstances, give thanks..." (1 Thess 5.18)

Not an Attitude, but an Act of Worship

"Gratitude" is a virtue much appreciated even in secular culture. Besides being a bedrock of good manners (alongside always remembering to say "please"), it is understood to be part of a well-formed humanity. From life coaches to twelve-step programs, people are urged to write gratitude lists and begin and end each day with moments of gratitude. In such a context, today's readings might be seen as simply solid human wisdom, perhaps with the Christian valence of being God-directed, but a message that corresponds to a value appreciated by people of all faiths, or none at all. A closer reading, however, reveals a far more theological claim about the nature of gratitude.

To begin with, we should note that the word "thank" occurs but once in this gospel passage, and not at all in the first reading. It is the action of the healed Samaritan, who "returned, glorifying God in a loud voice; and ... fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him." An unfortunate harmonization in the lectionary translation obscures the fact that, in his reply, Jesus does not refer to the man giving thanks. Rather, a more accurate translation of the Greek would be "Has none but this foreigner been found to return *to give glory* to God?" The Samaritan gives thanks, and Jesus equates this with giving glory to God. Giving thanks is not an attitude, but an act: giving glory to God.

A similar dynamic is found in the first reading. There, Naaman returns to offer extravagant gifts to Elisha in thanks for his healing. It is worth noting that, although this account is truncated to focus on this final episode,

Naaman had brought these gifts to give to the king of Israel to purchase a cure. Instead, he is sent to a simple prophet who asks nothing but heals him in a simple bathing ritual. Such is the dynamic of grace: it is given freely but demands an extravagant return. Elisha refuses the gifts, since the healing was not from him but from God. Naaman draws an accurate conclusion: his gratitude will instead take the form of sacrifice to the true God. Once again, gratitude is expressed in action: the worship of God.

Gratitude, then, is much more than a sentiment. It is an action of giving glory and worship to the God who is the source of all. This corresponds to the oft-noted sense of the word “liturgy” meaning “the work [of the people].” It is also a duty, a just and loving response to God’s own action through grace.

More than a Prophet

The strong parallel between these two stories amplifies a jarring dissimilarity between Jesus and Elisha. Elisha refuses the gifts offered by Naaman, for he was not the source of the man’s healing. Jesus, however, accepts the Samaritan’s act of thanksgiving, which is expressed through a clear act of worship. The lectionary translation mutes the force of the Greek text by truncating the expression: “He fell *on his face* at the feet of Jesus.” Unlike Elisha, Jesus does not refuse the healed man’s thanksgiving, and even more, accepts his act of worship. In response, Jesus gives the even greater gift of salvation. Jesus praises the man with a phrase dear to Luke: “Your faith has saved you” (see Luke 7.50; 8.48; 18.42). Elisha merely heals the man, whereas Jesus both heals and saves him.

Elisha refuses thanks, and Jesus accepts it, for Elisha is not God but Jesus is. Elisha is called a man of God, while Jesus is the Son of God. This story is a wonderful instance of many in Luke where he subtly but strongly identifies Jesus as God, giving the lie to the “critical” claim that the synoptics contain but a low Christology. Many will note that Luke uses prophetic imagery to characterize Jesus, with parallels drawn with Elijah and Elisha (Luke 4.25-27; 9.54-55, note the textual variants). But Jesus is so much more than a prophet, and the differences are more important than the similarities. The description of Jesus as “a prophet mighty in word and deed” by the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24.19) is only a partial truth, made *before* their eyes had been opened to the full truth of Jesus. The point is underscored by Luke in the story of the ten lepers with another small narrative shift: while the Samaritan is said to fall on his face at Jesus’s feet and thank *him*, Jesus says that he has given glory to *God*. Again, Jesus is subtly identified as God: to do homage and give thanks to Jesus is to do homage and give thanks to God.

Salvation to the Nations

By focusing on a Syrian and a Samaritan, these lectionary selections also point to the salvation of God being extended beyond the people of Israel to the Gentiles, who will believe in God and worship him. The first reading is particularly harmonious with this gospel from Luke. Although the story of Naaman is not directly referenced by Luke here, the association has already been suggested earlier. In Luke’s unique and majestic account of Jesus’s first teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus enrages the townspeople by referencing the story of Naaman as an example of how the Gentiles will receive God’s blessings and come to believe (Luke 4.27). The attentive reader, already primed by that association, will hear an echo of Elisha as Jesus heals ten lepers: Jesus is a prophet like Elisha, but greater, and God’s power is shown and recognized by a Gentile who comes to salvation through faith. Jesus heals by his own power, not one but ten lepers, and the nations are offered salvation by faith, expressed in thanksgiving and worship.

Such is the point driven home in the Responsorial Psalm (Ps 98), itself a hymn of thanksgiving: “The Lord has revealed to the nations his saving power.” It is a summons to worship God on account of his mighty deeds, expressed as salvation: “All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation by our God.” Like all the Psalms, it prefigures what God will do in Christ. Salvation is a particular emphasis of Luke, who highlights Jesus as savior from his very birth (“Today is born for you a Savior,” Luke 2.11; see *The Magnificat* where Mary calls God her Savior, [Luke 1.47], another instance of Luke identifying Jesus with God). Luke draws all this together in his

masterful construction of the story of the ten lepers: Jesus heals this Gentile's flesh, which draws him to faith, which brings salvation: "Your faith has saved you."

Salvation, Faith, and Participation in the Eucharist

In this way, we see that Luke shares Paul's theology of salvation: it is through faith and not through Jewish ethnic identity markers ("works of the Law"). In the second reading from St. Paul's *Second Letter to Timothy* (2.8-13), he refers to "the salvation that is in Christ Jesus." The emphasis here is on the flip side of the coin of Pauline theology: rather than justification by faith, Paul speaks of participation in Christ: "If we have died with him, we shall also live with him." Both these doctrines, of justification by faith and participation in Christ, are essential to Paul (and Luke), and neither are sentimental or abstract, but lived out in action. In his letter to the Romans, having majestically developed the doctrine of justification by faith (with a lot of participation of Christ weaved in), Paul kicks off the ethical section (so how does this mean we should live?) with a heartfelt plea to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, your spiritual worship" (Rom 12.2).

In our Catholic life, the pinnacle of the worship of God is in the Eucharist, whose name is derived from the Greek for giving thanks (*eucharisteō*). The Eucharist is itself an act of worship that gives glory to God. It is the sacrament of salvation, which expresses our faith, and in which we receive saving grace. It is an action, a liturgy, or a work of the people, in which we actively participate. It is a participation in Christ in the most radical way through sharing in his Body and Blood, offered for us in sacrifice. In the Eucharist we receive a gift for which we owe an expression of gratitude. Since that gift is the very life of Christ, we can only offer our own lives in return as a living sacrifice.

This returns us to that original observation: gratitude is not a mere attitude or sentiment, but an action that takes the form of giving worship and glory to the true God in his Son Jesus Christ. It is not a secular human act but a theological one. God's gracious generosity demands a response, an offering in return. In gratitude to God who has given us our human life and offers us salvation, we can only offer our lives in return, a living sacrifice of spiritual worship, offered at every moment but most fully in the Eucharist.

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For Further Reading

William Barclay, *Gospel of Luke: Daily Study Bible*

Michael Gorman, "Participating in Christ: The Heart of Paul's Theology and Spirituality"

Catechism of the Catholic Church #2637-2643

Cyril of Alexandria, *Homilies on Luke* #116

Richard Hays, "Did Moses Write About Jesus? The Challenges of Figural Reading"

In Short . . .

- *Both Naaman and the Samaritan show that gratitude is not merely an attitude or sentiment, but an action expressed by giving God worship and glory.*
- *Luke shows that Jesus is a prophet like Elisha but much more: He is God and the proper recipient of our thanks and worship.*
- *Both the story of Naaman and the ten lepers show how God's salvation begins in the people of Israel but is extended to all nations through faith.*
- *Salvation comes through faith that is actively lived as a life of spiritual worship, most fully realized in the Eucharist.*